DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 354 CS 214 483

AUTHOR	Dumas, Bethany K.
TITLE	Sociolinguistics in the Classroom.
PUB DATE	[93]
NOTE	16p.; Contains some broken print.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Communication; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; English; Ethnocentrism; Higher Education; *Language Attitudes; *Sociolinguistics; Standard Spoken Usage; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Chicanas; Chicanos; *Professional Concerns; Texas (South)

ABSTRACT

The application of sociolinguistic principles should be the concern of every professional person who has any control over what goes on inside a classroom, particularly the teacher, who has the most regular, if not the closest contact with the student. It sometimes seems, however, that in their approach to multidialects in the classroom, teachers take one step forward only to take two steps back. In South Texas a real provincialism exists among Anglos about learning Spanish, even though Spanish-speaking children are in the majority in the classroom. By the time Anglo students reach the sixth grade, and their parents see the wisdom of their learning a foreign language, they usually are taught the one variety of Spanish most useless to them--Castilian, rather than the popular variety. No one is advocating the cessation of teaching standard English to all students, but in the Southwest it is impossible to separate the question of multidialects from bilingual or even trilingual situations. In college classes, the teacher should consider herself a model not of "correct" English or of the "prestige dialect" but of linguistic versatility. All teachers, not just those in Freshman English, should be aware of the implications of sociolinguistic research. And the single change in the education system that would do the most good would be for every prospective teacher to have a sound course in sociolinguistics. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

CS

ED 373 354

SOCIOLINGUISTICS IN THE CLASSROOM

By

Bethany K. Dumas
Trinity University
San Antonio, Texas

Implicit in the topic "Sociolinguistics in the Classroom" are at least three areas of interest. One of these, the study of sociolinguistics proper, is largely the concern of the professional linguist, while another, the application of sociolinguistic principles, is, or should be, the concern of every professional person who has any control over what goes on inside a classroom, particularly the teacher, who has the most regular, if not the closest contact with the student. The potential for an unusually close relationship between these two areas of interest has long been known to us. William Labov early pointed out the possibilities inherent in the carrying out of sociolinguistic research in the school setting. One entire section, the concluding one, of The Study of Nonstandard English begins by defining sociolinguistic research as "the

CS214483

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
B. Dumas

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

observation and analysis of linguistic behaviour in its social setting, with full concern for the social factors which affect it" and suggests that much work of this type "will be done by teachers and educators who are more familiar with the classroom than linguists are, and who have the kind of regular contact with the problems which is needed." Finally, Labov suggests the interesting possibility, now a reasonably regular practice for many of us, that "research of this nature will become a regular part of procedure in many schools, since the most efficient use of teaching materials will always presuppose the teacher's knowledge of the language of students in his class." (Labov 1970: 61)

That the last statement does not, as it should, go without saying in many classrooms in this country will not come as news to you. Indeed, many people view with horror and disgust the notion that the teacher should know the language of the students in the classroom. My graduate students at Trinity University regularly report conversations at dinner parties in south Texas where the highly controversial topic "bilingual education" is usually certain to come up. The prevailing and very vocal view of many ill-informed Anglos is that "<u>they</u> could speak English if they really tried"--"they" in many cases being six-year-old Spanish-speaking monolinguals. My Spanish-

English bilingual students handle the situation best, I think, with monolingual Anglos, when they respond in Spanish, asking them after a short interval, "You could understand Spanish if you really tried, couldn't you?" Unfortunately, many of these ill-informed Anglos--and others--are in the classrooms, where they do untold damage to young Americans.

I have said that there are implicit in the topic "Sociolinguistics in the Classroom" at least three areas of interest. The third is important for the theme of this Conference, ")hidden agendas(" or "What Are We Doing When We Do What We Do?" -- which might be rewritten, certainly for this Panel Session, "Multidialects in the Classroom," as "What Are We Teaching When We Teach What We Teach?" For the fact is that sociolinguistic processes go on in the classroom whether we are aware of them or not, whether we engage in sociolinguistic research or not, indeed, whether we have ever heard the word "sociolinguistics." As we examine some of the implications of this fact, it will be well to recall Labov's caveat. He stated in his "Introduction" to Sociolinguistic Patterns that he had long resisted the term sociolinguistics, since "it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social" (1972: xiii). Whether it is any longer necessary to argue about what is or is not linguistics

I leave to your judgment, but it is certainly true that we ignore social factors in the classroom at our peril.

Several months ago I suggested that we as teachers have an obligation to recognize the importance of some questions largely ignored in materials currently available for introductory courses in "linguistics and language" and for more advanced courses in "sociolinguistics": (1) Does the teacher have a right to her/his own dialect? (2) What is the relationship between the teacher's dialect and the existence of multidialects in the classroom? and (3) Does the teacher have a right or an obligation--or neither--to gear her/his own dialect to that (or those) of her/his students? I would now like to suggest that the answers to these questions--interesting and important as they are--should follow from intelligent handling of larger questions. While it was from Labov, by the way, that I learned the phrase "the vocabulary of instruction" (1970: 46), it was from students that I learned the overwhelming importance of the vocabulary of instruction. By way of example, several years ago, when I was still teaching at Southern University in Baton Rouge, one of my graduate students was the wife of one of our swimming coaches. In the course of tutoring a member of the swimming team who was having serious problems with freshman English, Cathy Thompson discovered that the young

man did not know what the word "modify" meant. As soon as she understood this, she realized that almost an entire semester of "grammar" -- with its talk of adjectives modifying nouns, adverbs modifying verbs, etc. -- had been almost completely lost on this student. I shall never forget the quick intelligence and wit with which she handled the situation. "Jim," she said, "if you're standing up there and you don't have any special kind of clothes on, just ordinary clothes, then you're just a person. We don't know what kind of person, just a person. But if you take your ordinary clothes off and put on a pair of swim trunks, for instance, then you're a certain kind of person; you're a swimmer. Those swimming trunks modify you, because they make you into a special sort of person." The modification continued, I am happy to report, for Jim eventually transformed himself into a certain kind of student, the kind who passed freshman English. Now I think we'd all agree that that was brilliant tutoring, but what took place in that tutoring session should have occurred in the classroom.

The notion that a teacher should know the language of the students in the classroom is not the only sociolinguistic principle which disturbs and threatens. We are all aware of the extent to which so-called nonstandard dialects can threaten and alarm. The very fact that we will be discussing a proposed

position paper on "Students' Right To Their Own Language" is evidence for the controversial nature of the topic. And I sometime feel that in our approach to multidialects in the classroom we take one step forward only to take two steps backward. I was appalled, for instance, by the lead article in a recent issue of Freshman English News, Jeanette Kinyon's "To Abandon Standard English Is To Diminish Democracy.": The essence of the article is contained in this sweeping statement: "It seems to me that when we accede to demands to recognize another language as a first language, to permit the use of jargon or of a non-standard dialect of English, we approve a provincialism both self-defeating and devisive" (p. 1). Such a statement seems to me to put us back in South Texas at one of those dinner parties, at which we are sure to hear at least one Anglo parent say, again on the topic of bilingual education, "But why should my Susie have to learn Spanish?" There is real provincialism for you--a provincialism, by the way, that mysteriously disappears if we either substitute "French" for "Spanish" (at least in Texas) or wait until about the sixth grade, at which time schools announce, and parents accept, that it is desirable to have the student learn a foreign language. Even in the sixth grade, however, we exert our energies in behalf of a kind of provincialism when we insist that our

students learn the one variety of Spanish most useless to most of them--Castilian, rather than a Southwest variety. It is a sad commentary that we who claim to be most concerned with communication skills often do most to impede communication among the citizens of this country. And surely no one now takes seriously the notion that sociolinguists, or anyone else, for that matter, propose to abolish the teaching of standard English. I quote James Sledd:

> There is not...and there never has been, a serious proposal that standard English should not be taught at all, if for no other reason than because its teaching is inevitable. Most teachers of English speak it (or try to speak it); most books are written in it...and since every child, if possible, should learn to read, school children will see and hear standard English in the schools as they also see and hear it on TV. Inevitably, their own linguistic competence will be affected. (1972: 379)

On the other hand, I recall vividly the rather depressing experiences I had after leaving last year's CCCC meeting in New Orleans. Shortly after arriving at the New Orleans International Airport, I ran into a close acquaintance, a chairman of an English department at a large Southern university.

He was quite disturbed by the general tone of the meeting and was interested to learn what had gone on in Sessions 33 and 50, those on "The Consequences of CCCC's Affirming 'The Student's Right to His Own Language'" and "If We Affirm Our Students' Right to Their Own Language What Problems Do We Encounter in Our Teaching?" He was not pleased by what I had to report. Within ten minutes of meeting we were having a serious quarrel. He departed after accusing me of being an incorrigible racist--and all because I not only supported the position that the students have a right to their language, but that is is also possibly presumptious of us as teachers to presume to give that right. It did not stop there. At dinner that night, I upset a close friend sufficiently that an otherwise pleasant dinner was disrupted, while at dinner on the following day, I suddenly found myself under attack by everyone else present. Insofar as I could tell, I was accused of conspiring to corrupt the youth of our nation. I think we took three steps backward that weekend.

It is impossible, certainly in the Southwest, to completely separate the question of multidialects from bilingual or even trilingual situations. Scarcely a week goes by in San Antonio that a student does not approach me with a question about "Tex-Mex," which, in spite of all that we linguists have done, remains in the popular mind a bastard offspring of Spanish and

English, illegitimate for practically all human activity. And I do not intend to suggest a way to separate them now. Instead, I would like to suggest that the importance of understanding the sociolinguistic processes of any classroom situation is crucial even in a monolingual generally single-dialect situation. I think that if we can understand how very important it is even in that theoretically ideal linguistic situation we can better apply it to multidialect and multilingual situations--in which, as many scholars have demonstrated, and as many of us know from practical experience, real problems of communication stem more from ignorance of and hostility to cultural differences than any identifiable linguistic phenomena.

The longer I teach, the stronger grows my conviction that the first duty of "the teacher" -- that mythical abstraction who is in print often ageless, genderless, and from no time or place -- is to recognize that she (and here I will give the teacher gender in the form of one of the more common generic pronouns of American English), like all grown-ups, is a paper tiger; that is, while she does wield a lot of power, she can never completely control her charges. It is, of course, well that she cannot. One shudders to think what Miss Fidditch's students would have turned out to be if she had wielded absolute control -- or what we would turn out to be if those who would

govern us controlled us completely. But it is desirable that she recognize as early as possible that she is a paper tiger, for only then will she be able to make intelligent decisions about the areas in which she will make attempts to exercise control and toward what ends she will direct her efforts.

The precise goals of any individual teacher will be unique for her; generally speaking, however, all teaching goals fall within one of two categories. We direct our efforts either toward education or toward fulfilling the aim of the education system in this country. Whatever we have been told to the contrary, and however many times we have been told it, the aim of the education system in the U. S. is not to give the student the best possible opportunity of developing her own talents and interests; it is, rather, to churn out, in the right proportions, two sorts of people--a relatively small number of highly educated (or perhaps "trained" would be the better word here) experts to do the brainwork for the industries and businesses that control our economic system, and a large number of less well educated (or "trained") people to do the donkeywork. The success of the system has been minimal in this respect, though it is not from want of trying that the success has not been noteworthy. The schools in which most of us teach have all the right ingredients--or, more accurately, are minus the right ingredients, for if the schools in this

country are generally noteworthy for any one shared characteristic, it is in the degree to which we lack things. Our schools are short of money, the buildings in which we teach are hopelessly inadequate in one way or another, most of us are underpaid, there are not enough of us, our classes are too big, and our libraries are inadequate.

Even when we have enough money--or get a windfall in the form of a large grant designed to correct some particular inadequacy or set of inadequacies--we find that the extra money does not after all make much difference in the quality of education. The lack is much greater. The crucial missing ingredient is not unique to the education system, but is something shared by many American institutions. Our schools, like many of our other systems, are deliberately designed to discourage personal contact, while they should be designed to encourage personal contact. In this respect the schools are socially destructive institutions. Their destructive nature often begins with the buildings themselves--all too often nowadays excellent examples of that style of architecture which critics have called the New Brutalism--and is best seen for our purpose in the traditional classroom, lecture hall, and auditorium seating arrangements. Twenty or thirty or forty--or a hundred or two hundred or three hundred--students sit in neat

orderly rows across the desk from the teacher or facing a platform or a stage. In the classroom, the teacher sees all of them, or can see all of them if she chooses to. Often, of course, she does not so choose. I listened just last week to an all too familiar story of classroom neglect in a multicultural situation when I heard students from Crystal City--a small town in south Texas which has recently been taken over politically by La Raza Unida--tell of Anglo teachers who for years failed to achieve or even attempt any sort of contact, linguistic or otherwise, with the groups of Chicano students in her classes, who understandably always congregated in the back of the classroom.

But those students can't see each other. They may know their neighbors to the right and left, but the very arrangement of the room discourages the individual student from knowing many of her classmates. It is not uncommon for a college student to sit through a class for an entire semester without knowing anyone in the class well enough to even check on an assignment. So, socially speaking, our schools are very much like our communities. Individuals sit in individual desks as families live in individual houses; all observe the color bar if one exists; and the whole arrangement puts into ironic perspective the common descriptor of small-town America: everybody

knows everybody else. It is entirely reasonable to speak of a split personality in many American communities. This is crucial, because we have to see each other in order to know and understand each other. But so deeply ingrained in us is this tendency to avoid personal contact in many situations that students will deliberately avoid looking at another student in the classroom who is talking. Recently, in a lower division course in "Introduction to the Study of Language," I heard a student on the front row turn to his neighbor and say, "What's that guy talking about back there?" The "guy back there," a student sitting on the back row of the class wasn't just talking, he was also gesturing, and the gesturing was an important part of what he was communicating. When I suggested to the student on the front row that he turn around so that he could <u>see</u> what was going on, he protested, "But I don't want to just <u>look</u> at him." This is the same class that I tried to get to sit in a large circle earlier in the semester. The students were so uncomfortable seeing each other that we had to go back to the traditional arrangement in order to get any discussion going.

In spite of my failure in this situation, I do think that the classroom and the classroom teacher can have an effect upon this situation. We can, following the principles laid down by

Labov and others, study the linguistic behaviour of our students and put our knowledge in perspective by actively seeking to structure classes so that students become aware of the importance of the difference between competence and performance, so that they understand that all dialects have internal structure and order, so that they listen critically to teachers, so that they are aware of style-shifting as a way of interacting socially, so that they are aware of the importance of all nonverbal communication modes. But they can't become fully aware of these things unless they see each other and learn to recognize, respond to, and finally understand the relationships among the systems of communication used by all of us. The teacher herself should consider herself a model not of "correct" language or of "the prestige dialect" but of linguistic versatility. She should devise classroom procedures that will further these ends and she should remove from classroom procedure whatever does not further these ends.

It is probably clear to you now that I do not think that "Sociolinguistics in the Classroom" is either a subject matter or an activity that is restricted to classes in Freshman English and Sociolinguistics. Indeed, I think that all teachers should be fully aware of the implications of sociolinguistic research. If I were asked to suggest one single change in the education system in this country that might do more good than

anything else, I would suggest that every prospective teacher at every level have a sound course in sociolinguistics.